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Reagan And Monroe

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, March 13 — When President Reagan and President Mitterrand of France met the other day in the White House to discuss the problems of Central America, they did so under a portrait of James Monroe, the fifth President of the United States.

One wonders what Monroe would have thought of their conversation. He might have been consoled by the thought that, while long dead, his spirit lingers on in the yearnings of President Reagan. For like Monroe, the presiding President of the United States shares his view that the Americas must be defended against alien conquest or doctrine, though Mr. Reagan does not express it quite so well.

When, in 1821, the Russians claimed sovereignty over the northwest coast of North America, and the European powers threatened two years later to interfere with the independence of the Spanish colonies in this hemisphere, Monroe told them to get lost, only in more elegant language.

In his address to the Congress on Dec. 2, 1823, Monroe said the people of the United States "cherish sentiments the most friendly" toward the European nations, and would certainly not interfere in their internal affairs, but he added:

"It is only when our rights are invaded, or seriously menaced, that we resent injuries, or make preparation for our defense ... we owe it, therefore, to candor, and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers, to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere, as dangerous to our peace and safety. . . ."

Mr. Reagan, of course, agrees, but the differences between then and now are vast. Monroe had the words but he didn't have the power to enforce them. President Reagan has the power, but he doesn't have the support of the American people, the Congress or the allies in the hemisphere or the Atlantic to use it, or the words to explain his dilemma.

So Mr. Reagan is caught in a web of contradictions, most of them imposed on him by history, but some of his own making. He has dramatized the conflict in Central America as a challenge of the Communist powers, originating in the Soviet Union and implemented by Cuba, to meet this challenge "at its source."

But also, faithful to the nation's commitments to pan-American solidarity and the principle of non-intervention, he has proclaimed that while there is a major strategic threat to the security of the United States now in Central America, he will not intervene with American troops to deal with it.

So now we have the Reagan version of the Monroe Doctrine. This is to deal with the menace by indirection and subversion. First, he wants to try to convince the doubters in the Congress and the alliance that there really is a serious military buildup and political threat in Nicaragua and Salvador. By revealing his most secret intelligence evidence to foreign policy leaders of both parties, he has made some progress on this front but also placed his channel of intelligence in jeopardy.

Second, he has requested — and will probably get — Congressional approval not only for more arms to the anti-Communist forces in Central America, but also hidden C.I.A. appropriations for the financing, training and arming of anti-Communist mercenaries — sort of an American Foreign Legion, such as was approved by President Kennedy without notable success in the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

Monroe would probably agree with Mr. Reagan's objective, but President Mitterrand of France and President José López Portillo of Mexico, emphatically do not agree with his military approach to the problem.

They think, and Mr. Mitterrand came here to argue the point, that there is a better chance of trying for a political and diplomatic compromise. They believe that it is possible to contain this crisis by talking, however indirectly, to Fidel Castro in Cuba, the contending parties in El Salvador and Nicaragua and the other states in the hemisphere about collective security and a political settlement.

Mr. Mitterrand argued with Mr. Reagan, and insisted in a long news conference here, that the West should be concentrating on the *causes* of the turmoil in Central America and elsewhere — poverty and disease and social injustice — rather than on the *effects* of violence and civil war.

He had come to talk, he said, about the economic summit meeting at Versailles in June and what the industrial nations should do about the misery of half the human race. He had talked to Mr. Reagan, he said, about Poland and interest rates, the control of nuclear weapons and the divisions within the alliance.

In short, he understood the anxiety in Washington, he said, about Nicaragua and Salvador; but he was not able to agree with President Reagan about them. There are more important questions that should be at the forefront of our minds. Monroe on the wall, apparently, took no part in the discussion.